The film “Gandhi” produced and directed by Sir Richard Attenborough is considered as an all-time classic. It is one of those films, which created very deep impact in all corners of the world. It ran for days together with the cinema houses packed to their capacity. The stories appeared in the press during its screening how it influenced and changed the lives of the individuals after witnessing it.

For Sir Richard himself the completion of this film was the fulfilment of a fondly cherished dream. He derived immense satisfaction while working on it. The most prestigious organization selecting film and its creators for rewards, the Oscar Awards found this film worthy of five awards for its different aspects. This film created on the life of Mahatma Gandhi was successful in doing justice to its subject to a great extent.

Some of the scenes of this great film were filmed at Aga Khan Palace in Pune. This was the Palace where Mahatma Gandhi and his wife with Gandhi’s entourage were kept during Mahatma’s last imprisonment of his life. It was at this place where Mahatma’s wife and lifelong partner Kasturba Gandhi breathed her last within a few days after they were arrested. It was also at this Palace that Gandhiji’s most trusted, efficient and devoted secretary, Mahadev Desai also breathed his last. The enclosure of this Palace contains two memorials of these two devoted and lifelong companions of Mahatma Gandhi. Thus this place had important association with Gandhi’s life.

The entire complex of Aga Khan Palace has been turned into a permanent memorial. It is looked after by a society constituted for the purpose and named as Gandhi National Memorial Society.

Almost from the day of the inception of this society, the well-known Gandhian social worker Smti Shobhana Ranade has acted as its secretary. This society played host to Sir Richard Attenborough and his team. The team worked on the campus for 12 days and a warm and cordial relationship developed between Shobhana Ranade and the team led by Sir Richard Attenborough. Smti Ranade recalls in this article some of the interesting experiences and incidents that took place in course of the shooting of the film at Aga Khan Palace.

We find that Sir Attenborough took great care to see that shooting of the film at the palace did not hurt the sentiment of the management as well as the people of India. He harboured the deepest respect for the Mahatma and his teachings. It was this deep faith and respect that led to the creation of an immortal classic—“Gandhi”.

Ishani is grateful to Shobhana Ranade for agreeing to write down her reminiscences of Sir Richard Attenborough working at Aga Khan Palace. The experiences and incidents described have a great human value but they also have historical significance to the best of our knowledge. These details are being published here for the first time. We experience great satisfaction for this development.
In today’s world full of hatred and violence there is need for love and compassion. To establish these virtues once again efforts are being made to apply the Gandhian touch to create an atmosphere of peace and prosperity for all. I believe that in the process of achieving this goal of Universal Brotherhood, Sir Richard Attenborough’s contribution has played a major role. His film on Gandhi was so well made that it made a great impact on the minds of people all over the world. I had the rare good fortune of knowing the Attenboroughs from close quarters while they were camping in Pune to produce the great film, which had earned most of the prestigious Oscar Awards! It was a very interesting and most educative experience for me because I could learn a number of organizational skills from Richard himself.

It was in the year 1981-82 when I learnt from Delhi about Sir Richard Attenborough who was going to make a film on Gandhi and that he will come to Pune for shooting at Agakhan Palace. I was thrilled to get the news, but a few of the trustees of our Gandhi National Memorial Society did not appreciate the making of a film on Gandhi, which would have been ‘nakali’ (not real or original) and that it would mean degrading Gandhi. Some other trustees, however, felt that this was a golden opportunity to introduce and familiarize Gandhi to the wide world. The trustees had a divided opinion with the result that one senior trustee actually resigned from his membership on this issue! Again, the trustees asked for a new copy of the text of the film, revised and corrected. Late Dr. R.R. Divakar, the noted senior Gandhian was deputed to see that each and every word and the scenes were well scrutinized and corrected. Only after such scrutiny the producer will be allowed to shoot the film. No errors would be tolerated. We also advised Richard not to shoot in the same room of the Palace where Gandhi was interned. Richard was sympathetic and appreciated the sentiment. He willingly agreed to observe the discipline laid down by the Trustees.

The following were the conditions laid down for shooting of the film ‘Gandhi’ at Agakhan Palace.

1. Instead of making use of the room in which Ba and Bapu lived, an identical room should be selected and organized for shooting. Richard readily agreed to do this.
2. They should never enter Ba-Bapu’s room with shoes on. Richard never did it.
3. Inside the monument and on the entire grounds of Agakhan Palace, smoking, drinking alcohol and eating non-vegetarian food is strictly prohibited. Richard and his entire team of 200 people used to come to the Palace early morning at 6 a.m. and used to return to their hotel rooms at about 8 p.m. every evening for 10 days continuously. They erected temporary tents on the grounds for their own activities like tea and meals, rest rooms, changing rooms, office administration, etc. He would invariably come to my office at 1 p.m. and request me to have my lunch with them. I never did it because he wanted me to see and make sure that they were following the strict discipline ordered by us. I did not join because I was quite sure of his sincerity and integrity. Sometimes Sheila, his wife would come to invite me! Both of them were most cordial and courteous in their dealings with us!

4. Visitors were not allowed during the 10 days of film shooting. The Trust was therefore deprived of the revenue. But Richard on his own paid due compensation graciously.

5. Every day a group of safai workers used to sweep and clean the Palace scrupulously and make it very neat and tidy, before the team left for their hotels.

The last 10 days of Kasturba Gandhi were shot at the Palace. She had passed away on 22nd February 1944 and Richard was working seriously to pay high tribute to her memory as she was the best half of Mahatma Gandhi! There were some interesting dialogues in the script between her and a foreigner journalist, a lady who was the press photographer. However, Kasturba’s expressions as acted by the actress and the conversations as filmed were objected to by Dr. R.R. Divakar. The entire script was, therefore, revised by Divakarji. Richard had accepted this change gracefully!

I can never forget one incident regarding Ben Kingsley who acted as Gandhi in that film! Richard was shooting an incident where poor Ben Kingsley had to climb up and down the marble steps of the Palace. Richard was not happy about his steps. He made him do that climbing at least 50 odd times. I was watching Ben and his desperate effort to satisfy Richard. But Richard was getting
furious. I could not control myself and asked him, “Why are you so harsh with him? The poor man is trying his best!” Richard said “No”; “he is not following my instructions carefully.” He said, “Gandhi hailed from Kathiwad, a district of Gujarat, where men wear a dhoti and while walking they place the right foot first in a half circle movement and their dhoti gets moved in the same direction. Richard did that movement so easily and professionally that all of us started wondering how he knew all these details of Gandhi’s dress. I was quite surprised and so I asked him how he mastered all the details. Straight came the question to me from Richard, “Shobhana, how many times have you read Gandhi’s biography?” I said “maybe 3-4 times” and he retorted immediately and said “I have read it 108 times, so I know each and every detail of it!” He was right and that is why he was such a perfectionist in making his film ‘Gandhi’. He was thoroughly saturated with Gandhi, the superman ever born! With Richard, I was always excited to hear him speak as a disciple of Gandhi who spoke with passion and from the depth of his heart about the unique contribution of Ba and Bapu to the entire world. Gandhi was born in India but was adopted by the suffering humanities of the world!

Richard was interested in knowing about our new project of training Gandhian Rural Social Workers (women) and he encouraged and enabled us to continue this training for a number of years. He wanted to spread the Gandhian thought to all corners of India by training them as messengers of non-violence and peace. The girls were recruited from all the states of India and they stayed together for one year to complete the training. It also worked out into a beautiful experience in national integration. He supported this activity by giving financial assistance to our Gandhi National Memorial Society. I am happy to state here that this network of social workers has proved to be the greatest achievement of our Gandhi Memorial Society. I recall that we trained a large contingent of about 60 social workers from the state of Manipur in the far-eastern corner of our country.

We were greatly delighted to learn that ‘Gandhi’ by Richard was a great hit and got the highest appreciation. Richard was naturally felicitated with five Oscar Awards for his great historical film. We arranged quite a few shows in Mumbai and Pune, which were very popular. We arranged a grand function on the grounds of Agakhan Palace to felicitate Richard and his team of actors and actresses. Ben Kingsley and Rohini Hattangadi were the main attraction of the evening. Dr. R.R. Divakar was also there!

There was an open interview arranged by the Press and a question was asked to Rohini, “Why did you visit the Samadhi of Kasturba early in the morning?” Rohini became nostalgic and said “because I wanted to be closer to Ba spiritually and that used to give me moral strength to perform my role as Kasturba. I had a wonderful feeling of Kasturba entering into my soul and encouraging me to act well.” While saying this, she had tears rolling on her face. I vividly remember this sight even today.

Richard also donated to us large photographs from his film for displaying in the Palace. When Sheila and Richard came to say ‘good bye’ to us, all of us felt that we would be losing our best friends. He was very natural, informal and a loving person. We exchange greetings every year punctually and try to re-live the happy memories of the film shooting.

Richard had to face a great tragedy about his granddaughter who was in Phuket, Thailand. She was enjoying a holiday on the island. When we read about it in the newspapers, we immediately talked with him over phone. He sounded very sad and depressed.

It was Gandhi who introduced us to each other and thus we became the members of the great Gandhi Family! All our best wishes are always with Richard and his family.

*The author is the Secretary of Gandhi National Memorial Society, which looks after the management of the Aga Khan Palace at Pune. Although in her eighties, the author Shrimati Shobhana Ranade has remained active till date in various social service programmes. Born in 1924, she has obtained degrees of B.A. in Economics and M.A. in Sociology and a special diploma in Montessori Education. Even at this age she holds office in a number of national level and regional level social service organizations of eminence. She has also earned a large number of awards from national and regional bodies. Some of these are Rajiv Gandhi Manav Seva Award of Government of India, 2007 and Tagore Literacy Award of Indian Adult Education Association, Delhi 2007 and National Award for Child Welfare Services, 1983. She also has half a dozen
publications to her credit on the subject of children and services for children. She can be contacted at gandhi_memorial@vsnl.net.

More information on the film Gandhi and on the Aga Khan Palace, Pune, on the next page.

Aga Khan Palace, Pune

Aga Khan Palace is situated in the Yerwada area of Pune. Sultan Mohammed Shah, Aga Khan III, who was elected as the President of the League of Nations in 1938 and was well renowned in the field of politics and sports, got the palace constructed in the year 1892. The aim behind the construction of the Aga Khan Palace was to provide employment to the people of the nearby areas, who were hit by famine. The palace covers an area of 19 acres, out of which 7 acres is the built up area and is an excellent building from architectural point of view. It captivates the eye of an spectator with its magnificence and picturesque beauty. It took five years and Rupees 12 lakhs to complete this Palace. Area of its ground floor is 1756 sq meters. That of the first floor is 1080 sq meters. Prince Karim El Huseni, Aga Khan IV, donated the palace to India in 1969, in the honour of Gandhiji and his philosophy.
One of the major attractions of the Aga Khan Palace is the samadhis (memorials) of Kasturba Gandhi (wife of Mahatma Gandhi) and Mahadev Desai (a long-time aide of Mahatma Gandhi). Since both of them breathed their last in here, Charles Correa got their samadhis built in the grounds of the palace itself.

The palace served as the venue for the famous movie Gandhi. Since the year 1980, the management of the museum, samadhis and campus of the Agakhan Palace is under the Gandhi Memorial Society. The museum inside the palace complex has rich collection of pictures, depicting almost all the important incidents in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. There is also a wide assortment of his personal items like utensils, clothes, mala, chappals (slippers), letter written by Gandhiji on the death of his secretary, etc.


About the film Gandhi

Gandhi (1982)  Courtesy of Columbia Pictures
35mm (also Super-Panavision 70mm), colour, 188 mins
Director: Richard Attenborough
Production Company: Columbia Pictures
Producer: Richard Attenborough
Screenplay: John Briley
Photography: Billy Williams, Ronnie Taylor
Music: Ravi Shankar
Cast: Ben Kingsley (Mahatma Gandhi), Candice Bergen (Margaret Bourke-White), Edward Fox (General Dyer), John Gielgud (Lord Irwin), Trevor Howard (Judge Broomfield)
An Indian attorney, Mohandas K. Gandhi, aids the cause of civil rights for Indian immigrants in South Africa by advocating the use of non-violent protest. Later he becomes a political leader in India, where he helps to achieve his nation’s independence from Britain, resulting in the creation of India and Pakistan.

Released in 1982, Sir Richard Attenborough’s epic biopic of Mohandas K. Gandhi, expertly played by Ben Kingsley, won eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Director and Actor, not to mention five BAFTA and Golden Globe Awards. A cherished but unrealised project of David Lean, the film is drawn on an epic canvas worthy of Lean himself, with a cast of thousands called upon to do justice to the life of India’s Mahatma.

Beginning in 1948 with Gandhi’s funeral (featuring an estimated 400,000 extras), the film soon flashes back to 1893, where we are introduced to the central character as a young, privileged lawyer in South Africa. From here the film moves chronologically up to the great man’s untimely demise. We witness Gandhi’s burgeoning conscience and rise to national leader intent on ending British Colonial rule in India and bringing about his country’s independence.

Many key events from Gandhi’s life are captured, notably the Salt March in 1930 - when he led hundreds of thousands of Indians, forbidden from producing salt, to the sea to make their own salt - as well as the massacre at Amritsar and Gandhi’s ensuing hunger strike in protest at the actions of the British Army. The film is most successful in its cinematographic grandeur, with Attenborough and directors of photography Billy Williams and Ronnie Taylor doing justice to one of the twentieth century’s landmark lives and stories.

But despite the film’s plaudits and its undeniable visual flair, Gandhi is not beyond criticism. Many of the supporting characters remain on the periphery, their motivations never fully explained. While this is excusable in the case of more minor characters, one lingering source of discontent persists over the depiction of Mohammed Ali Jinnah (played by Alique Padamsee), who worked alongside Gandhi and Nehru in fighting British Rule and went on to found Pakistan. Some critics have argued that the film is unfairly biased against Jinnah, depicting him as a scheming, Machiavellian figure, intent on seeing the partition of India to satisfy his own hunger for power.

It has been suggested that this negative characterisation reflects the bias of co-founders the Film Board of India against the founder of India’s neighbour and rival. Other problems are the depiction of a Gandhi of saintly perfection (although stories of the Mahatma’s more peculiar characteristics didn’t emerge until years later), and a rather wearying pace.

— Ali Jaafar

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